# Hinduism – What it is and its origin

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After the demise of Prof. D.N. Jha on February 4, 2021, one of his earlier interviews on Hinduism were made available on the web link https://openthemagazine.com/lounge/books/a-bible-on-hinduism/ Prof. DN Jha was professor of history at Delhi University and the general president of the Indian History Congress in 2005-06. The excerpts of Prof. Jha's interview deal with his book on "Rethinking Hindu Identity" Published April 2, 2009 by Routledge. In the book Prof. Jha observed that "*There may be a few sects younger than Hinduism, but it is certainly one of the youngest religions. The word Hindu in the sense of a religion does not exist in Sanskrit texts prior to the 19th century. Given this fact, how do we accept the view that Hinduism is an eternal religion? It cannot be treated as eternal or sanatana—the Sanskrit term for eternal.".*

Actually, the observations of Prof. Jha are not new. More often than not, many of the intellectuals like Prof. Jha and to some extent Prof. Romila Thapar, another historian of modern times (she was also recently in news) do cherry picking to support their views and "research" on Hinduism. What they have been arguing is the so called naming ceremony of Hinduism as a religion. Attaching the word "Hinduism" or "Hindu" to a religion is of recent origin, may be 200-300 years old.

I will not dwell on this aspect and also who was responsible for this state of affairs. It is indeed a topic I love to discuss but not here. Instead, I will try to give as authentic presentation as possible on the origins of the phrase "Hinduism" from different angles.

There is an excellent manuscript by David N. Lorenzen titled "Who invented Hinduism" published by Cambridge University press in *Comparative Studies in Society and History,* Vol. 41, No. 4 (Oct., 1999). I will give only a few excerpts from the publication so that the discerning readers may judge about the whole issue of Hinduism.

Lorenzen starts his article with a quote: "…. *Moreover, if people of Arabia or Persia would ask of the men of this country whether they are Moors or Gentoos, they ask in these words" 'Art thou Mosalman or Indu?'* This quote was originated in 1563, long before the chronology indicated by Prof. Jha. Lorenzen went on to say:

> *"If what one means by Hinduism is simply the English Word itself, then the claim that it did not exist before the nineteenth century is correct. It is also true that the word Hinduism became common in English only in the second quarter of nineteenth century, and mostly in books by British authors.*

(My observation: This does not mean that the concept and practice of Hinduism were non – existent earlier! It is like Nicolaus Copernicus enunciating his solar theory. The Sun did not become centre of the Universe just because Copernicus found out! Even before Copernicus, the Sun was and is still centre of the Universe with all the planets orbiting it.)

What could have happened when these authors (mostly British) coined the term "Hinduism" was that they knowingly or unknowingly imposed a single conceptual category on a heterogeneous collection of sects, doctrines, and customs that the Hindus themselves did not recognise as having anything essential in common. This however, does not take away the fact that the Hinduism without being labelled as such was much more ancient! We may take this as naming of a child long after he was born!

W.C. Smith in his 1962 book, "The Meaning and End of religion: A New Approach to the Religious Traditions" Published by Macmillan Co. New York made an excellent observation:

> "*What exists cannot be defined. What obstructs a definition of Hinduism, for instance, is precisely the richness of what exists, in all its extravagant variety from century to century and from village to village. The empirical religious tradition of the Hindu developing historically in the minds and hearts and institutions and literatures and societies of untold millions of actual people is not a form, but a growing congeries of living realities. It is not to be compressed within or eviscerated into or confused with any systematic pattern".* (like the way British authors and Prof. DN Jha tried to do!) He goes on to add: "*Hinduism refers to an entity; it is a name that the West has given to a prodigiously variegated series of facts. It is a notion in men's minds-and a notion that cannot but be inadequate. To use this term at all is inescapably a gross oversimplification.*"

That was what was exactly done by Prof. Jha like self-proclaimed historians to fit the concept of Hinduism into a rigid framework of religion on the lines of Islam and Christianity!

Now, let us come back to Lorenzen's article. He goes on to say:

> "*This essay argues that the claim that Hinduism was invented or constructed by European colonizers, mostly British, sometime after 1800 is false. The evidence instead suggests that a Hindu religion theologically and devotionally grounded in texts such as the Bhagavad-gita, the Puranas, and philosophical commentaries on the six darsanas….." In any case, only a recognition of the fact that much of modern Hindu identity is rooted in the history of the rivalry between Hinduism and Islam will enable us to correctly gauge the strength of communalist forces and wage was against them.*
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> *"In 1817, Rammohan Roy claimed that the doctrines of the Unity of God are real Hinduism, as that religion was practised by our ancestors, and as it is well known at the present day to many learned Brahmins. This puts the proponents of the British construction of Hinduism in the embarrassing situation of having to admit that an Indian Hindu seems to have carried the label for this supposedly British construct.*
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> *"The term Hindu itself is a Persian term. Used in the plural it denotes the people of Hind, the Indians. And in this sense, it occurs in the inscriptions of Darius I and other rulers of ancient Persia from 6$^{th}$ century onwards. Persian scholars knew and distinguished different religions among Hindus. Administrators however, saw no need for such differentiation between Hindus for taxation. The British adopted the term from administrators and used that way and popularized".*

Rest of the intellectuals misinterpreted as if the word was invented only in the nineteenth century to assert its "recent origin" which is far from the truth.

Lorenzen concludes his manuscript thus:

> "….. *This is the tendency of many historians of modern India-especially those associated with the subaltern school-to adopt a post-colonialist perspective that privileges the British colonial period were invented and constructed. Richard Eaton noted :" The notion of postcoloniality situated all Indian time in reference to the British imperial period: time was either precolonial, colonial or postcolonial."*

Lastly, Lorenzen very succinctly observes:

> *"(Hinduism) is an institution created out of a long historical interaction between a set of basic ideas and the infinitely complex and variegated socio-religious beliefs and practices that structure the everyday life of individuals and small local groups. …….. Hinduism was not invented sometime after 1800, or even around the time of the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate. What did happen during the centuries of rule by dynasties of Muslim sultans and emperors was that Hindus developed a consciousness of a shared religious identity based on loose family resemblance among the variegated beliefs and practices of Hindus, whatever their sect, caste, chosen deity, or theological school…….. The Hinduism was not invented by anyone, European or Indian. Like Topsy, it just grow'd."*

This was long before the period identified by the postcolonial historians who were wedded to the concept of accepting the term Hindu as used by British administrators as the starting point of Hinduism!. "*To define Hinduism is to deny the Hindu his right to the freedom and integrity of his faith. What he may do tomorrow no man can say today*." These are not my words. These are spoken by W.C. Smith.

I am tempted to quote 21st sloka of 7th Adhyaya from Bhagavad Gita:

यो यो यां यां तनुं भक्तः श्रद्धयार्चितुमिच्छति |
तस्य तस्याचलां श्रद्धां तामेव विदधाम्यहम् || 21||

*Whatever form a devotee seeks to worship with faith, I steady the faith of such a devotee in that form.*
That is the beauty of Hinduism.